



## Journal of International Women's Studies

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Volume 5

Issue 2 *New Writings in Women's Studies: Selected*

*Essays from the First Women's Studies Network (U.K.)*

*Association Essay Contest*

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Article 2

Mar-2004

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### Recommended Citation

Baker, Caroline (2004). An Exploration of Quaker Women's Writing Between 1650 and 1700. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 5(2), 8-20.

Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol5/iss2/2>

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## **An Exploration of Quaker Women's Writing Between 1650 and 1700**

By Caroline Baker<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Throughout the tumultuous period that was the English Civil War, there was a great change in society's values and beliefs resulting in the establishment of many new political and religious groups. Quakerism, established in the 1640's, appealed to women as it gave them freedom to prophesy and to proclaim the gospel. This study explores the role of Quaker women's writing specifically between the years 1650 and 1700, a period of increased religious prominence. Texts from this time are examined including the journal and the epistle to the prophetic tract. The presence of women as preachers and missionaries is explored in a time of civic and political unrest, illustrating how Quakerism gave women the opportunity for religious freedom and expression through writing.

*Key Words:* Quaker women, gender, writing

### **Introduction**

The tumultuous English Civil War of 1642 generated increasing dissatisfaction with the ecclesiastical organisation of the English Church, provoking substantial changes. Historians, including Hilary Hinds and Christopher Hill showed that between 1645 and 1653 there was "a great overturning, questioning, revaluing of everything in England; a questioning of old institutions, beliefs, values" (Hill 1972, p.12). Puritans began to break away from Catholicism, resulting in the rise of the independent democratic congregation, and the dissolution of the English Church (Chedgzoy 1997, p.8). Out of the struggle that had engulfed the nation, increasing demand for action arose and political and social dissatisfaction led to the establishment of many new and radical groups.

Quakers, one of the most radical groups to emerge during the two decades of the English Civil War and Interregnum (1649-1660)<sup>2</sup>, emerged in the North of England in the early 1650s spreading quickly to become a highly successful and influential movement. Quakers built their outlook upon the scriptures, believing God's presence was in everybody and by faith in The Inner Light; they could gain direct access to God.

From the start, Quakers were intensely active, defining themselves as an emerging radical movement through their confrontational writings' (Corns and Loewenstein 1995, p.1). Hundreds of articles produced fiercely condemned temporal authorities, attacked orthodox Puritanism and godly ministers, and rejected social hierarchies. Quakerism appealed to women as it gave them space to prophesy and proclaim the gospel<sup>3</sup>. Like other Nonconformist women, female Quakers played a major role in the survival of Quakerism during intense persecution.

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<sup>2</sup> Their name (like that of the Shakers) was derived from their behaviour of "trembling and shaking" (Trill 1997, p.9).

<sup>3</sup> After the Reformation, women could not enter a religious order, unless they joined a movement outside the Established Church, such as Quakerism where there was no distinction between clergy and laity (Mendelson & Crawford, 1998).

Quaker writings account for a large proportion of texts produced by women during this period, mainly because this sect produced the most women writers (Salzman 2000) illustrating the importance of women's roles in early Quakerism, as both missionaries and as writers and encouraging women's expression and independence<sup>4</sup>.

This study focuses on work written between 1650 and 1700, a period of prominent writing for the movement. The texts represent a variety of Quaker writings, including the journal, the epistle, and the prophetic tract<sup>5</sup>. Travel writing also constituted an important part of Quaker narrative as a method of spreading the Quaker religion. These works illustrate each writer's personal involvement within the period's wider political and religious struggle.

### **An examination of the history of Quaker women's writing**

The first person to join the founder of Quakerism, George Fox, in 1647, was a woman. An already established preacher, Elizabeth Hooton (1630's-1672) was the first Quaker to be imprisoned for preaching (Hobby 1988, p.36). In the 1650's, Hooton felt compelled by God to travel to Quaker settlements in the West Indies and New England, becoming one of America's earliest female travellers (Hobby 1988, p.37). However, her experiences were not always positive, as she faced much antagonism<sup>6</sup>:

I was whipped before it was light then fetched he down Sarah Coleman who was, I thought, older than myself then my daughter and whipped us each 10 stripes a piece with a 3 corded whip, and said to my daughter are you not glad now it's your turn she said I am content, so they put her hands in a very strait place which pressed her arms very much (Hooton 1660's, p.42-43).

Despite Hooton's treatment, women were not prevented from demonstrating their beliefs. In the 1650's, they were engaged in many public actions to publish truths they sought to witness, including 'going naked for a sign':

On the 3d of the 3d month [May], 1655 Sarah Goldsmith...with her hair hanging down her, and without any other clothes upon her, excepting shoes on her feet...stood about half an hour, till the tumult grew so violent, that some bystanders...forced them into a shop, out of which the multitude call'd to have them thrown... (Crawford and Gowing 2000, p.256).

Quakers also resented having to pay tithes, the taxes, which supported the ministry. Believing that the word of the Lord was present in everyone, they considered ministers who took money for spreading 'the truth' were cheats. Protests were sometimes achieved individually, but usually as part of a group and in 1659, they took a petition to Parliament with more than 7,000 signatures calling for the abolition of tithes and recommending other radical changes:

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<sup>4</sup> Published writings by more than eighty radical women have survived from the period 1640-80 (Hobby 2001). Crawford estimates that published works of female Quakers consisted of up to twenty percent of all 17<sup>th</sup> Century women's publications (Crawford 1985), and there is evidence of as many as 300 female prophets active between 1640 and 1660 (Mack 1992, p.1).

<sup>5</sup> Research by many historians including Mack and Crawford indicates it was not just men who wrote.

<sup>6</sup> According to Phyllis Mack, Quakers provoked more hostility and violence than those of any other group. Negative reactions to women prophets such as Elizabeth Hooton "stemmed from the public's increasing fear of disorder" (Mack 1992, p.249) during the turbulent period of the Civil War and Interregnum but also from the belief that Quaker prophets, both male and female were witches, and were accused of confessing to devil worship.

It may seem strange to some that women should appear in so public a manner, in a manner of so great concernment as this of tithes, and we also should bring in our testimony even as our brethren against that Anti-Christian law and oppression of tithes, by which many of the servants of the Lord have suffered in filthy holes and dungeons until death. But let such know, that this is the work of the lord (Westwood 1659, p.38-9).

These declarations illustrate the importance of historicizing and reclaiming women's writings to support a distinctively 'feminist' history and to erase differences between women.

Quakerism did not just liberate women; the function of women's meetings did not radically challenge contemporary expectations of women's roles; and although in theory, women could hold church office, "apart from Margaret Fell they were not prominent in church hierarchy" (Trill 1996, p.48). Quakerism allowed women to express their experiences, assessing and recording in detail their own lives<sup>7</sup>.

However, women did not search for a uniquely female voice, as this would contradict Quaker aspiration to merge the "self" with God<sup>8</sup>. Women could preach, an important and prestigious seventeenth century position, and argue with men intellectually. They felt freer than others to write, as they recognised Christ's spirit may "speak in the female as well as male" (Fox 1656, p.20). They were driven to write by the spirit, which, they believed guided, them: "The word of the Lord came unto me, saying write and again I say write"<sup>9</sup> (White 1659, p.1). Many publications were warnings, admonitions or lamentations. Most were a woman's only venture into print, showing a strong sense of pressure: "This warning and reproof...I dare not withhold from this my Native Land" (Redford 1650's, p.2). Their beliefs were a burden until printed: "In true love to your Immortal Souls, have I cleared my conscience" (Dole 1650's, p.19), but the evidently divine origin of their message gave them authority and pride (Prior 1985, p.225).

Women gained strength in the ideology of Quakerism and courage not to cower before male authority figures, or fear terrible punishments and death. George Fox, and other theorists demonstrated the importance that Christ was as strong in women as men, asserting God preferred some women before thousands of men, as certain biblical female preachers appeared in contemporary times, urging:

Moses and Aaron and the seventy elders did not say to those assemblies of women 'we can do our work...and you are more fitted to be at home' (Fox 1694, p.235)

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<sup>7</sup> In 1672, Quakers preserved two copies of every text produced since their beginnings. Wilcox illustrates that there is "the largest body of early women's printed texts [created] in the Restoration" (Wilcox 1996, p.253) and "of the nearly two hundred first editions by women published between 1651 and 1670, ninety-three of them were by Quaker women" (Ezell 1993, p.134).

<sup>8</sup> One prominent Quaker, Hester Biddle proclaimed: "We are not like the World, who must have a Priest to interpret the scriptures to them...the Lord doth not speak to us in an unknown Tongue, but in our own Language do we hear him perfectly" (Biddle 1662, p.11).

<sup>9</sup> An increase in radical sects, together with the breakdown of state-regulated censorship between 1640 and 1660 validates the proliferation of women's writing (Keeble 2001). This increased publication volume, and array of published material available. The traditional view that "man is made to govern commonwealths, and women their private families" (Cavendish 1665, p.47) was challenged for the first time by defences of women's right of access to public spheres of activity, including publication.

### **Travel, radicalism and the power of The Inner Light**

For Quakers, travel was vital in informing people of their faith. 'Travel' for missionary purposes, even when undertaken by women, who viewed themselves in struggle against, their society, "implies all the most obvious conceptions of power relations between the traveller and those visited" (Wiseman 1996, p.154). Not uncommonly, it was women who left their family to travel in the cause of truth.

Phyllis Mack believed certain women travelled following encounters with authority, either their own authority to preach and interpret visions or with Quaker leadership to direct their activities<sup>10</sup>:

A woman might have felt impelled to leave her family...not because she was excited by a vision of greater opportunity elsewhere but because she simply found herself unable to stand in front of the high cross, dressed in sackcloth and ashes, and succeed in emptying her mind of thoughts about the sick child or the work to be done at home (Mack 1992, p.208).

During travel, collective identity was vital. When Katherine Evans and Sarah Cheevers were confined in Malta, hallucinating from lack of food or comfort,

As owls in deserts, and as people forsaken in solitary places; then did we enjoy the presence of the Lord, ...and we did see you our dear friends, ...and did behold your order, and steadfastness of your faith...and were refreshed in all the faithful hearted, and felt the issues of love and life which did stream from the hearts of those that were wholly joined to the fountain (Evans and Cheevers 1663, p.33-34).

Evans and Cheevers formed an extraordinary companionship. Travelling in 1658, to Alexandria, they left behind their families to preach and distribute Quaker writings following in the footsteps of the apostle, Paul. However, at Malta they were imprisoned for their beliefs<sup>11</sup>, for three and a half years, between 1659-1662. Their autobiographical account, A Short Relation of Cruel Sufferings, written during imprisonment, is both a record of resistance and an act of resistance in itself. Their struggle, involved taking-on and challenging authority: their radical beliefs and passionate activism stemmed from early Quakerism.

Their writings, their active courage and astonishing capacity for endurance advertised their situation to the outside world. Evans and Cheevers gained confirmation of themselves in the recognition of readers, who shared their understanding of the meaning of their experience through their letters:

We did eat but little in two months and they did bring us whatever we did speak for, for eight to ten days. And afterward we were so straitened for want of food, it did us

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<sup>10</sup> However, Quakers also experienced problems during travel, particularly with authorities. Accounts of difficulties by female Quakers occurred in such records as An Account of the Travels, Sufferings, and Persecutions of Barbara Blaugdone (1691). Repeatedly imprisoned, threatened and set upon by those she preached to, Blaugdone (c.1609-1705) was always delivered from great hurt: 'They sent forth a great wolf-dog upon me, which came fiercely at me to devour me, and just as he came unto me, the Power of the Lord smote the dog, so that he whined and ran in crying, and very lame' (Blaugdone 1691, p.81).

<sup>11</sup> Throughout the 1650s due to periods of intense persecution, and after the restoration many Quaker texts were written during periods of imprisonment. Imprisonment was a result of many factors, including the Quaker's practice of speaking in public places, interrupting church services, admonishing local officials or clergymen, prophesying in market places or town squares, or 'going naked as a sign' (see Chapter One).

more hurt than our fast. Yet the Lord did work as great a miracle by our preservation as he did by raising Lazarus out of the grave (Evans and Cheevers 1662, p.21).

They resolutely challenged Catholicism iterating that, “We have not read (the word Catholic) in Scripture...the flesh and blood of Christ is Spiritual” (Evans and Cheevers 1662, p.15-16).

During imprisonment, they switched into periods of ecstatic visions and prophecy. Evans records she sees “a great wonder in Heaven, the Woman cloathed with the Sun, and hath the Moon under her feet, and a Crown of twelve stars upon her head, and she travelled in pain ready to be delivered of a Man-child” (Evans and Cheevers 1663, p.264). She believed she was the living embodiment of God’s word:

Whatsoever I have written, it’s not because it is recorded in the Scripture, ...but in obedience to the Lord I have written the things which I did hear, see, tasted, and handled of the good word of God (Evans and Cheevers 1662, p.12-13)

A literal reading of the Bible and the life of Christ provided a charter for their social order and behaviour, registered in texts as an endorsement of their activities<sup>12</sup>. In A Short Relation of Cruel Sufferings, they emphasis gender in terms of closeness where both figures are written as experiencing events corresponding to Christ:

My life was smitten and I was in very great agony, so that my sweat was as drops of blood, and the righteous one was laid into a sepulchre, and a great stone was rolled to the door, but the prophecy was that he should rise again the third day, which was fulfilled. But the next day they came to sit upon judgment again...And they brought many propositions written in a paper, but the friar would suffer the magistrate to propound but few to us, for fear the Light would break forth (Evans and Cheevers 1662, p.19)

The account of Christ’s life, crucifixion and entombment are juxtaposed with immediate details of their imprisonment, demonstrating verbal and chronological distortions characteristic of ecstatic Quaker writing<sup>13</sup>. They portray themselves “as actual historical persons in a very real physical environment, and as Christ figures embodying a much larger historical truth” (Graham 1996, p.230). This illustrates their individuality as humans and as Quakers. Their account also re-enacts Quaker conviction that lives could be quite fully “a living testimony”: Friends could signify, in their words and activities, the meaning of returning to the Light, setting an example for others to follow.

Joan Vokins’s autobiography God’s Mighty Power Magnified (1691) is also a “living testimony” to a life of faith. She was “a faithful servant” and “hand –maid of the lord” (Vokins 1691, p.58) who journeyed extensively in America, the Caribbean, and Ireland, visiting Friend’s communities, exhorting Quakers to stand firm in the faith, resisting temptations the material world offered:

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<sup>12</sup> This is evident in the work of Elizabeth Hooton and Barbara Blaugdone, who set off towards Bristol, with no map but God’s inner light to guide her: “In my Travers I went several miles upon long Downs, and knew nothing in the way, but as the Lord was with me and did drive me” (Blaugdone 1691, p.14).

<sup>13</sup> Descriptions of bodily suffering gathers the literal and the figurative in the phrase “my sweat was as drops of blood”, where the reference to blood has bodily and scriptural connotations.

It's in my heart to stir you up to feel after the pure life, if haply you may find it...be ye not negligent, nor unfaithful; but be faithful and obedient...through the faith...you may draw water at the fountain of life (Vokins 1691, p.60)

Vokins' radicalism in converting her whole family to Quakerism, before leaving them to travel to America to preach<sup>14</sup> demonstrated their inadequacy to her: "The feeling of his [Christ's] sweet refreshing life that he communicates to my soul is a hundred-fold better than husband or children, or any other outward mercies that he hath made me partaker of, though very near and dear unto me" (Vokins 1691, p.66). These "outward mercies", are no contest for the inward ones stemming from her faith, which gave her satisfaction and a capacity for activity otherwise unavailable to her.

The images oppose any notion of Vokins as weak in anything other than body, a condition that did not prevent her carrying out God's work. In Rhode Island she silenced Thomas Case, "the grand Ranter, [who] was bawling very loud" (Vokins 1691, p.35) and disrupting Friend's meetings and was "haled out" of church for interrupting the clergyman.

Contradictions between strength and weakness, of the "nursing mother", and the "modest" writer, are centrally important not only to Vokins's writing, but to many sectarian women writers<sup>15</sup>. The biblical text most often cited by sectaries locates this contradiction with God's coming, when it will become clear that "God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty...and things which are not, to confound things which are" (I Corinthians 1.27-8)<sup>16</sup>.

Women's achievements were possible by the power gained through their identification as weak receivers of God's word. Within the confines of femininity, they "were able to negotiate a space that allowed for decidedly unfeminine activities" (Hobby 1988, p.38). For women whose thinking developed within a patriarchal society, it was natural, within their personal and cultural experiences and Quaker doctrine, to express their private spiritual authority as mothers in Israel and their public authority in the language of male prophets. As visionaries or prophets, Quakers took on many identities, portraying themselves not merely as individual, biological men or women but as "souls with the potential for both masculine and feminine expression" (Mack 1992, p.237).

### **The justification of women's speaking; an analysis of the writings of Margaret Fell, Priscilla Cotton and Mary Cole.**

The Church of Christ is represented as a Woman; and those that speak against this Woman's speaking, speak against the Church of Christ, and the Seed of the Woman, which Seed is Christ (Fell 1666, p.2).

Throughout the seventeenth century, justifying women's speech was complicated. Quaker rationalization of women's speaking defined them metaphorically as men, while other prophets

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<sup>14</sup> Another Quaker, John Bowne, describes his wife's voyage from America to England and her return home: "But in a little time she declared unto me, that when she was upon the seas, it was in her [mind] that she must say, 'Husband, I am come to see thee, but I must not tarry.'...I could freely have given up all to have accompanied her [back to England]; but not daring to stir without the leading of the Lord, I was made freely willing to part with her, and remain at home with my little ones" (Bowne 1677, p.2-3).

<sup>15</sup> See for example the works of Sarah Blackborow, Hester Biddle and Dorothy White.

<sup>16</sup> This assured reversal of the existing state of affairs justified what would otherwise have been unjustifiable, including women leaving their families, travelling and preaching. Vokins herself "chose rather to suffer with the people of God, than to enjoy...all the pleasures, or profits, or honour this world can afford" (Vokins 1691, p.9).

sought to speak from a space, theoretically beyond the earthly limitations of sexual classification:

Quakers who had attained a state of salvation, or had acquired “the inner light”, sometimes spoke as though they had shed their gender altogether; women declared that they stood before Christ as men, and men declared, metaphorically, that they had become women (Mack 1986, p.464)

The struggle to establish the ‘truth’ of women’s speeches was integral to their sex; often women themselves made reference to existing beliefs about their supposed ‘weakness’<sup>17</sup> to legitimise their expression. The reception of their speech was based upon the extent of their conformity to culturally distinguished ideals. The perceived value of a woman’s speech or status altered depending on the context of her speech and audience.

Women’s identification as ‘weak vessels’ prone to irrational, hysterical behaviour, made such behaviour thinkable: “women might in general be enjoined in silence, but if their words were interpreted, as issuing from God, they could speak and would be listened to” (Hobby 1988, p.48).

Within the Quaker faith, and other seventeenth century sects including the Baptists, Independents and Congregationalists, women could not speak or preach in church. There was one important exception however, that of the prophet. Justified by Anna (Luke 2:36) and the tacit approval of Paul, a female prophet, extraordinarily and miraculously inspired, “might speak without restraint” (Robinson 1610, p.237). Before a woman could become a Quaker, people had to believe her voice stemmed from God not herself<sup>18</sup>:

If [women] speak, they are not to do it by permission, but by commandment...if the Spirit of the Lord Command or move a godly and Spiritually Learned Woman to speak, in that case she is the Lord’s more than her Husband’s, and she is to speak... (Keith 1674, p.11).

The Bible provided examples of earlier women prophets, but was also the authority for the ruling that women should not minister. A frequently cited passage on this issue, is Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, verses 34 and 35:

Let your women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak; but they are commanded to be under obedience, as also saith the law.

Two of the most prominent Quaker texts on this subject are Margaret Fell’s Womens Speaking Justified, (1666)<sup>19</sup> and Priscilla Cotton and Mary Cole’s pamphlet To the Priests and People of England (1655). These texts were instrumental in contributing to women’s public speaking,

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<sup>17</sup> This is illustrated in the following words by the prophet Mary Cary: “if any shall hereby receive any light [from my prophecies] let them blesse the Lord for it, from whom alone it came: for I am a very weake, and unworthy woman, and have not done this work by any strength of my owne, but have often been made sensible, that I could do no more herein of my self, then a pensil or pen can do, when no hand guides it; being daily made sensible of my own insufficiency to do anything, as of myselfe”. (Cary 1648, p. 66-67).

<sup>18</sup> Natalie Davis illustrates these beliefs in her essay ‘Women on Top’, suggesting, “Orderly women might be disorderly in public. In principle women could pronounce on law and doctrine only if they were queens, had unusual learning, or fell into an ecstatic trance” (Davis 1975, p.145-46)

<sup>19</sup> The first edition of Womens Speaking Justified was printed in London in 1666, but a further edition, also printed in London followed in 1667.



forming part of a continuing debate, not just amongst Quakers, on women's position within religious discourse<sup>20</sup>.

Margaret Fell (1614-1702), a key figure in early Quakerism, referred to as a 'tender nursing mother', ignored patriarchal ideals of submissive womanhood. She spoke out, fighting for her convictions, becoming an influential seventeenth century Quaker<sup>21</sup>. In Womens Speaking Justified, perhaps her most famous work, written during a period of imprisonment in Lancaster Castle, Fell disapproves the received interpretation of St Paul's text forbidding women's speaking in church. She reinterprets the myths of Creation and the Fall, critiquing the "naturalised" distinctions between the sexes, and authorising women's speech, pronouncing, "God...put no such difference between the Male and the Female as men would make" (Fell 1666, p.15). She depicts numerous references to significant female biblical characters, to Jesus' acceptance of them as messengers, and the Biblical partiality for personifying the church as a woman:

And whereas it is said, I permit a Woman not to speak, as saith the Law: But where Women are led by the Spirit of God, they are not under the Law; for Christ in the Male and in the Female is one; and where he is manifest in Male and Female, he may speak (Fell 1666, p.6).

In her argument Fell is concerned with specifying which women can speak, suggesting St Paul did not mean all women should be silent. Women were clarified as "unregenerate [who should keep silent] and those regenerate women, illuminated by the spirit, who enjoy spiritual equality with men" (Keeble 1994, p.188).

Her characterisation of unregenerate women challengingly relies upon existing stereotypes of disobedient or sinful women. She identifies forbidden speakers with "the Jezebel...the false Church, the great Whore, and tattling women and busie-bodies" (Fell 1666, p.15)<sup>22</sup>. The "tattlers and the busybodies", representing the false church, are forbidden to speak "by the True Woman [of] whom Christ is the Husband, to the Woman as well as the man, all being comprehended to be the Church", for "Christ is the head of the Male and Female, who may speak" (Fell 1666, p.16)<sup>23</sup>.

Priscilla Cotton and Mary Cole were collaborators and co-authors who wrote a short, impassioned and confrontational pamphlet during imprisonment in 1655<sup>24</sup>. An important textual

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<sup>20</sup> Other examples of Quaker texts on this subject include Richard Farnsworth's A Woman Forbidden to Speak in the Church, the Grounds Examined, the Mystery Opened, the Truth Cleared, and the Ignorance Both of Priests, and People Discovered. London, 1654, George Fox's, pamphlet, The Woman Learning in Silence, 1656 and Ann Audland, A Testimony against False Prophets, and False Teachers: And Also the Objection Answered, concerning the Woman Forbidden to Speak in the Church, In The Saints Testimony Finishing through Sufferings, London, 1655.

<sup>21</sup> According to Chedgzoy, Margaret Fell published 'more than 20 works on Quaker issues' (Chedgzoy *et al* 1996, p.217)

<sup>22</sup> Contrastingly, Katherine Evans believed that while individual women might preach, the *real* women were those unsanctified Jezebels, male and female, who were to keep silent in the church: They say Paul would not permit of a woman to speak in the church; it is true...no more do not the Quakers; neither do they permit a woman to speak in the church, nor a man that is born of a woman; but he that is born of God, whether in male or in female, let him speak freely...But Paul nor John neither would not permit that Jezebel, that painted harlot, should speak in the church, who hath painted herself with the saints words (Evans and Cheevers 1662, p.35-36).

<sup>23</sup> Despite this her definition of the 'true' church is not purely directed at those outside Quakerism. Her 'justification' of 'women's' speaking was partly informed by a desire to control the expression of women *within* the Quaker movement of the 1660's (Wilcox 1996, p.49).

<sup>24</sup> Their argument is interesting as it predates Fell's by eleven years.

aspect is its reworking of women's speaking. They condemn the malice, hypocrisy and evil of the priests, their followers who persecute and imprison the 'just and pure seed of God', the Quakers. They trace such evil doing to the Gospel, arguing the priests' inverted and corrupt understandings prohibit them from spiritual authority – an authority that, through their scriptural interpretations, they appropriate for themselves.

Arguments regarding spiritual authority and 'prophecy' rights, like Fell's are based on notions of gender and scriptural reliance. Gender considerations, regarding correct behaviours of men and women are prevalent. They attempt to justify women's 'prophesying', referencing St Paul's text from 1 Corinthians, but also Paul's first epistle to Timothy:

Let the women learn in silence, with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. (1 Timothy 2:11-2)

and Corinthians through which they take issue over defined and appropriate gendered behaviour:

Every women that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered, dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. (I Corinthians 11: 4-5)

They attempt to turn the Bible against itself, quoting other texts, which, they say, make it necessary to reinterpret Paul's message:

Thou tellest the people, women must not speak in a church, whereas it is not spoke only of a female, for we are all one, both male and female, in Christ Jesus, but it's weakness that is the woman by the Scriptures forbidden, for else thou putteth the Scriptures at a difference in themselves, as still it's thy practice out of thy ignorance (Cotton and Cole 1655, p.6-7)

They believed St Paul's text should be interpreted symbolically, that 'woman' should mean 'weakness', a quality commonly associated with womanliness in contemporary discourse. Since "man in his best estate is altogether vanity, weakness, a lie", both men and women are forbidden to prophesy if their speech is merely human, not divinely inspired. However, with the Light within, anyone could speak, because the words are no longer 'weak':

Here mayest thou see from the Scriptures, that the woman or weakness, whether male or female, is forbidden to speak in the church...Indeed, you yourselves [the church ministers] are the women, that are forbidden to speak in the church, that are become women (Cotton and Cole 1655, p.5).

Gender removal, was the key principle in the right to speak in church, but does not presume anyone can speak in church: "For know, there is the seed of the woman, and the seed of the serpent", 'the generation of Cain and righteous Abel' (Cotton and Cole 1655, p.1). It is only the elect, "the seed of the woman", those descended from Abel who could speak.

Although both texts defend women's speech, the methods and arguments vary. Fell cites detailed, wide-ranging scriptural examples for female speech, but is careful and conservative in her claims and in Quakerism logic. She accepts only certain women could speak, and only in certain circumstances, defending women's preaching rights on grounds of weakness, not talent: "Mark this, ye despisers of the weakness of Women, and look upon yourselves to be so wise; but Christ Jesus doth not so, for he makes use of the weak" (Fell 1666, p.7). Cotton and Cole's tract

also demonstrates biblical familiarity, but parodies the use of it by the learned. However, their scriptural use isn't unique: Francis Higginson had attacked Quakers for claiming in their meetings that the terms "male" and "female" need not refer to actual men and women, but to the occurrence of Christ in the person speaking<sup>25</sup>.

## Conclusion

By the late 1660's, there was a constant undercurrent of uncertainty among Quakers concerning women's freedom and participation. Some men neither understood nor valued women's services. This uncertainty prevailed during women's preaching, prophesying, travelling, and publishing. It was due to fears and reservations, outrage and hostility towards female ministry that meant women's speaking must be justified in print. In their writings, early Quaker women writers including Fell and Cotton and Cole revealed efforts to ensure the right women ministered, as they were conscious of dangers associated with women's teachings. The woman whose speaking was justified was not the woman "in the disobedience of Eve" or still "in the law", but she who was "led by the spirit of God" and who was "in the Gospel".

Female prophets were displaced to Women's Meetings, which controlled women in new ways, providing grounds for regrouping and developing other challenges to the limits of femininity<sup>26</sup>. Writing between 1650 and 1700 covered various divergent themes and styles, passing through a series of changes. Amongst the very first publications are texts written during imprisonment.

From about 1655 onwards, more prophecies were published appealing to specific groups of people, or the inhabitants of specific towns to repent. Cotton and Cole's work illustrates how writers dwell less on specific circumstances of sufferings, emphasising the general ruling and overturning what is within reach. Warnings reached a peak between 1659 and 1662, a turning point for Quakerism with the return of Charles II to the throne in 1660.

Prophecies and justifications of women's preaching in the 1650's were very radical. Through their relationship with the spirit, Quaker women claimed a freedom to publish. Resolved in their belief of direct contact with God, they gave a symbolic reading to biblical commands. Texts are heavily referenced with biblical quotes, demonstrating a strong belief in The Inner Light.

The shift to a seemingly more serene female role after the Restoration of the monarchy also distinctly affected writings. Women who earlier had shouted and argued for change were now preoccupied with caring roles. Once 'inspired' behaviour was no longer desirable, writing God's words became strenuous. Quaker women were not silenced in their withdrawal, but the price they paid to continue being heard was high.

Women's role within Quakerism changed dramatically from the 1670's. Prophecies published were more "rational" than earlier polemical works, concerned with matters of internal discipline than matters of state. Margaret Fell's Womens Speaking Justified illustrates this change, as it is more measured and authoritative than for example, Cotton and Cole's work.

By the 1680's, published pamphlets were lamentations, establishing friends "are falling away", exhorting the young to follow faithfully, parental guidance. Other pamphlets were

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<sup>25</sup> Francis Higginson, A Brief Relation of the Irreligion of the Northern Quakers (London 1653), cited in Mack, Visionary Women: "one Williamson's wife...said in the hearing of divers [people]...that she was the eternal Son of God; And when the men that heard her, told her that she was a woman, and therefore could not be the son of God; She said, no, you are women, but I am a man" (p.157).

<sup>26</sup> In 1680, Joan Vokins rapidly returned home from her travels after being called by God to defend the Women's Meetings: Though *Amalek* lay in wait by the way, and the opposite spirit did strongly strive, yet our Good Shepherd did visit his handmaids, and (blessed be his name) filled us with his overcoming power, when the mothers in Israel were so dismayed, as we were likely to have lost our Women's Meetings (Vokins 1691, p.29).

informative: “The transformations that these writings undergo are a clear example of what it means to think of femininity as a negotiated construct” (Hobby 1988, p.48).

At a time when women were overwhelmed by moral and physical weakness, by ignorance and love of playfulness, women’s task as Friends was not accomplished lightly. Their perseverance, humour and certainty were the products of a religion and a faith, which were ridiculed and legislated against, and of a sisterly unity, which the structures of Quakerism promoted. Their philosophy was summed up in a letter quoted from the women Friends of Lancashire to those elsewhere: “Though we be looked upon as the weaker vessels, yet strong and powerful is God...we can stand our ground.”

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<sup>27</sup> Due to the age and nature of the texts, it was sometimes difficult to find exact dates for some of the extracts used. However, in most cases I have tried to give an estimated date.

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